Overview of Down Syndrome

Down syndrome is a genetic condition and developmental disability that is usually caused by an extra copy of the twenty-first chromosome. According to current data about 250,000 people in the United States have Down syndrome. Studies show that about 1 in 800 babies are born with Down syndrome, and the chance of having a baby with the genetic condition increases with the age of the expectant mother. Down syndrome does not typically run in families and is not caused by anything either parent did or did not do.

Advances in medical care and research over the years have given people with Down syndrome better overall health. The traits, medical conditions, and abilities of people with Down syndrome vary widely and cannot be predicted before they are born. They generally have mild to moderate cognitive delays, low muscle tone, and higher chances for a variety of other health issues over their lifespan. Because of advances in health care, education, and public attitudes, common perceptions and future opportunities for people with Down syndrome have improved significantly over the past few decades.

Understanding Down Syndrome

- Children with Down syndrome are more similar to other children than they are different.
- Individuals with Down syndrome have a variable range of intellectual disability from mild to moderate (not typically severe).
- Babies with Down syndrome usually have developmental delays and benefit from early intervention, including physical, occupational, and speech therapy, to help them meet their milestones.
- 80% of babies with this condition have hypotonia or low muscle tone at birth. This usually improves with time, and physical therapy can help.
- 50% of babies with Down syndrome will have one or more health issues: 40–60% of babies with Down syndrome have a heart condition and 12% have a gastrointestinal condition, which may require surgery. The outcomes of these surgical repairs are very good. Referrals to specialists are appropriate for identified complications.
As a result of improved public attitudes and acceptance, many people with Down syndrome are thriving as active and valued members of the community. This includes children who are involved in social and school programs with their peers and many adults who are employed and live independently or with some support. Research shows that almost all persons living with Down syndrome are happy with their lives and are loved by their families.